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SUBJECT: PRC: SKEPTICAL REACTION TO PRESIDENT'S
ANNOUNCEMENT ON AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson for reasons
1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Official PRC reaction to the President's announcement of the way ahead on Afghanistan and Pakistan has been limited to a cautious statement by the MFA press spokesman at a regularly scheduled press conference December ¶3. Party-run media outlets expressed skepticism about the President's plan and suggested that it was unlikely to achieve its desired result. South Asia experts at government-affiliated think tanks argued that the President's announcement of a timetable for redeploying troops would embolden the Taliban and erode Pakistan's willingness to confront domestic extremists. One expert suggested that the U.S. should focus on improving Afghanistan's education system, expanding employment opportunities and re-balancing the ethnic composition of the Afghan Army in order to avoid future ethnic conflict. Another expert opined that regional actors had begun envisioning South Asian regional relations following a U.S. military exit, and suggested that the U.S. and China should work together to develop a broad strategic consensus among key actors on regional relations following a U.S. military departure. END SUMMARY.

Cautious Official Reaction to President's Announcement

¶2. (SBU) MFA Spokesperson Qin Gang stated at the regularly scheduled Foreign Ministry press briefing on December 3 that China hoped the international community would contribute to establishing peace and stability in South Asia while fully respecting those countries' independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. When asked to comment on President Obama's December 1 announcement of a way forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Qin responded that China hoped to sustain the momentum of the dialogue with the United States on these regional issues. The U.S.-China joint statement issued during President Obama's November visit highlighted efforts by both sides to establish peace and stability in Afghanistan, Qin concluded. PRC officials have not made additional comments on the President's announcement.

Negative Media Reaction to President's Announcement

¶3. (U) PRC newspapers were generally negative in their assessment of the President's speech. The mass circulation international affairs newspaper Global Times (which, though published by the official People's Daily, does not necessarily reflect the Party's official viewpoint) opined on December 3 that President Obama's announcement had generated more criticism than support, while also reporting that Afghans were apathetic about the U.S. troop increase. The article reported that the Taliban would fight to the end, while also commenting that U.S. domestic support for the war had declined, in part due to its cost. The Xinhua Daily

Telegraph reported December 3 that U.S. difficulties were directly tied to over-reliance on the military. The International Herald Leader, a paper published by the Xinhua News Agency, reported December 3 that President Obama could only pray that the situation in Afghanistan would improve in the next year. The English-language edition of Global Times on December 8 suggested that if the U.S. demonstrated sufficient sensitivity to questions that China considered as bearing upon its core interests, including Taiwan, then China possessed almost unlimited resources and capability to help stabilize the situation in Afghanistan.

PRC South Asia Experts Question President's Plan -----

14. (C) During a December 3 meeting with PolOff, MFA-affiliated China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) South Asia scholar Rong Ying questioned how a mission that the U.S. failed to complete over the past eight years could be achieved over the next 18 months with the infusion of 30,000 troops and several hundred civilians. Rong explained that many Chinese analysts viewed the President's announcement as an exit strategy and predicted that regional actors -- notably Pakistan, India and the Afghan Taliban -- would hedge until the "announced U.S. withdrawal."

15. (C) Ministry of State Security-affiliated Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) South Asia scholar Hu Shisheng predicted to PolOff December 2 that the announced force withdrawal starting in July 2011 would have two effects: 1) to bolster the confidence of the Afghan Taliban, who would wait out the U.S. presence; and 2)

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to sap the will of the Pakistan Army to confront domestic extremists, given that the Pakistan Army would find too daunting the challenge of dealing with extremists on its own after the U.S. departure. Afghan EmbOff Mirwais Nab on December 3 recounted to EmbOffs being told by PRC South Asia scholars that the negative undercurrent in Beijing to the President's announcement stemmed in part from PRC concern that the increased U.S. military presence in Afghanistan would push the Afghan Taliban and other extremist forces from Afghanistan into Pakistan, Central Asia and potentially western China.

16. (C) Not all PRC analysis of the President's announcement was negative. Chen Yurong, an expert on Russia and Central Asia at CIIS, told PolOff December 3 that the President's announcement was the only viable choice. She reacted positively to the President's emphasis on gaining the support of the local population, while cautioning that implementation would be very challenging. She expressed doubt at the viability of timetables for redeployment.

PRC Experts Offer Advice for Way Ahead -----

17. (C) CICIR's Hu suggested that the U.S. and its partners should focus on education, employment and the composition of the Afghan Army in order to prevent the outbreak of ethnic conflict in Afghanistan. Hu suggested that the U.S. request that neighboring countries, including China, build schools and colleges throughout Afghanistan as a means of diluting the influence of extremists. To increase job opportunities for Afghans, Hu asserted, the U.S. should assist Afghanistan in restoring traditional agricultural and handicraft sectors. On the ethnic composition of the Afghan Army, Hu warned that the disproportionate number of Tajiks in uniform could lead other ethnic minorities in Afghanistan to conclude that their interests were being neglected, which could spark ethnic conflict in the absence of U.S. intervention. Hu recommended that U.S. experts invite Chinese counterparts to conduct joint field studies in Afghanistan to identify areas where China had a comparative advantage and could offer concrete development support to U.S. and coalition efforts.

18. (C) CIIS' Rong stated that every regional actor was starting to envision South Asia following the U.S. military departure from Afghanistan, and each actor had its own vision for regional relations. Rong explained that regional players, including China, still harbored suspicions about the United States' strategic intentions in South Asia. Rong cited U.S. encouragement of India to contribute to Afghanistan's reconstruction as an example. India's assistance had directly impacted Pakistan's sense of security, Rong explained, not just because Pakistan viewed Afghanistan as a source of strategic depth, but also because India's involvement in Afghanistan had stirred ethnic and religious tensions in Afghanistan that had reverberated throughout Pakistan. Given the interlocking nature of relations in South Asia and the fact that the U.S. and China were major powers in Asia, Rong argued, we should foster a broad strategic consensus among key actors on what regional relations should look like following a U.S. military departure.

HUNTSMAN